African universities face a daunting challenge

J. M. Léger

In the educational system being established, redefined and reshaped in the developing countries, the universities have — or will have — a key part to play in three activities: research, the training of managers, and promotion of the cultural heritage. In Africa, in particular, there is now a determination on the part of academic and political leaders alike to place the universities at the service of the nation and to integrate them fully into society. At the same time, it is within the capacity of the universities to help to generate a new concept of development that incorporates the difficult but vital reconciliation of African culture and technological progress.

In both English- and French-speaking Africa, universities began as more or less faithful replicas of British or French models. This stage was a brief one: 10 to 15 years on the average. Opposition to "imported" universities derived less from emotional factors than from a realization of the irrelevance of such institutions to the traditions and the social, cultural and economic circumstances of African society.

The growing clamour for reform was addressed not only to the universities, but to the educational system as a whole, and pointed to its inadequacy from the cultural, social and economic point of view. The resulting Africanization went beyond the mere substitution of indigenous teaching staff for foreigners, and embraced the very concept of education.

Generally speaking, Africanization of the senior administrative levels is now completed, and Africanization of the teaching bodies is progressing and should be completed in 10 to 15 years. The various radical and gradual changes in structures, curricula and methods are dominated by a two-fold objective: relevance to national or regional needs, and reduction of the cost of education.

There is a striking proliferation of university-level institutes of technology and similar institutions. They constitute a first step towards countering the acute shortage of higher-level technical managers, a gap that is at present being bridged partially, and at great expense, by experts and technicians from abroad.

The new African universities are characterized by a research effort that is not only growing rapidly, but is geared to national objectives. The fact that a number of them now have doctoral programs in some disciplines, and others are gradually achieving this, obviously facilitates the carrying out locally of scientific work that young academics were previously compelled to do abroad. Similarly, the growing number of research centres and institutes is opening up new possibilities for young African scientists. Thesis topics now relate to African conditions, and research programs are defined and oriented more and more in terms of national policies.

This trend has been facilitated by the fact that many African countries have recently established their own scientific research and policy structures, with responsibility for co-ordinating all research activities and resources in order to shape them into a genuine instrument for development. There is also a strengthening of relations between universities and non-university research centres and institutes. The needs are so great and the men so few that academics are led to participate actively in state research institutions, as directors of national research centres, consultants to governments on specific projects, and so on. There is no essential conflict between these different functions; the university, after all, is not considered external to the machinery of state, but is regarded as a vital element in the overall national apparatus for training, research and culture.

Say what we will, technology is not neutral. It carries within itself the society that produced it — and all that society's values, concepts and structures. The major problem of our time is to reconcile the vitality of national cultures with technological progress. In Africa it is the universities that hold the key. This is demonstrated by a number of significant developments: contributions to the effort to gather and transcribe oral traditions; the growing number of institutions teaching black African art and literature; the vitality of research into African society and history; and the activities of centres of applied linguistics, one of whose main tasks is to pave the way for the introduction of national languages in education.

In a few short years, the universities of Africa have assumed a major share of the burden of preserving and promoting the cultural heritage, in order to ensure a contemporary creativity that draws its sustenance from authentic African sources. Since the universities are also responsible for training teachers and have committed themselves to the demanding function of continuing education, they find themselves at grips with all the central problems of African society. The challenge they have taken up is indeed a daunting one.

In the search for solutions to the common problems of black Africa, inter-university co-operation is clearly imperative. Practised with mixed success in a wide variety of areas, and compromised sometimes by undue

haste, particularly on the political level, this kind of co-operation can perhaps be most readily, most fruitfully and most lastingly achieved in the cultural and scientific sphere.

A number of bodies are working to promote organized co-operation among African universities. The Association of African Universities has a system of grants to encourage student exchanges between French- and English-speaking countries. The Conference of Rectors of African Universities, in conjunction with AUPELF (the Association of Partially and Entirely French-Language Universities) approved in July 1973 what amounts to a charter for inter-university co-operation in Africa, and instituted two years ago a system of short-term exchanges for African university professors. It has also drawn up an inventory of the scientific potential of the universities, and is preparing an index of teachers and researchers. These two documents should foster the development of practical co-operation among the various institutions.

There are two other forms of co-operation that show particular promise. On the individual level, there has been a proliferation in recent years of pan-African cultural and scientific associations based on specific disciplines. Their seminars, talks and publications encourage a team approach and foster mutual awareness among African academics. On the institutional level, there is a strong desire to use the regional approach to eliminate duplication and prevent the dissipation of human and material resources. It is in this spirit that the Conference of Rectors has launched a study into the feasibility and possible structure of an African graduate institute for scientific studies that would provide a means of co-ordinating the division of labour on a continuing basis.

A decade or so from now, the universities of Africa will no longer have much in common with what they were 10 to 15 years ago. While retaining their universality in broad measure, they intend to become — and in part have already become — institutions at the service of African society with roots running deep into that society, and able to generate a response to the basic question: how to discover an overall method of development compatible with African civilization, one that not only preserves but strengthens the soul of Africa and the illustrious cultures in which it finds expression. □

Former journalist and foreign affairs correspondent, Jean-Marc Léger is Secretary-General of the Association of Partially or Entirely French Language Universities (AUPELF). This article was originally published in French in Le CRDI Explore *Vol. 5 No. 2.*

Health care for the most people

Alexander Dorozynski

The majority of people in the developing world have little or no access to modern health services. Worst affected are the rural people who live in remote villages cut off from the towns and cities where modern health facilities are available. In such communities even a very basic health service could bring a vast improvement, for most of their health problems are serious only if they remain untreated, and do not require either the attention of a highly-trained physician or the facilities of a sophisticated modern hospital.

The question facing most developing countries, then, is not how to build more hospitals or train more doctors (many of whom would probably prefer to remain in the cities or leave the country for more lucrative posts in Europe and North America anyway), but how to provide primary health care to the rural areas — and thus to the majority of the people. Perhaps the best known of such efforts is the Chinese example of "barefoot doctors," but the concept of auxiliary health workers with specialized training is by no means limited to China. Under various names and in different forms it has been and is being tried in many parts of the world — often with dramatic results.

The IDRC is supporting a number of such projects at different stages in their development. Here Alexander Dorozynski, Associate Director, Publications, examines one success story from the Middle East.

About 60 percent of Iran's 33 million people live in some 65,000 villages. Outside of the major cities and towns there is one doctor for every 15,000 people. The infant mortality rate in rural Iran is over 120 per 1000 live births. These are the statistics that led to the creation in September 1973 of Iran's experimental Village Health Worker program.

"There is no alternative," says Dr Houssain Ronaghy, Director of the Department of Community Medicine of Pahlavi University and initiator of the project. "Even in the next 20 years we cannot possibly supply every one of these villages with a physician. In this country, and in most developing countries, the priorities are in primary health work rather than in creating fancy hospitals which consume most of the money."

To prove his point, Dr Ronaghy set out to create a model for village health care that would provide at least a "partial solution" to the problem. Now a study of the first years of operation of the Village Health Worker (VHW) program vindicates the doctor's stand and shows that a health auxiliary stationed in a rural area can make a considerable contribution to the general health of the local population.

The idea was simple, and, Dr Ronaghy admits, not unlike the Chinese model. In an area near the town of Kavar, south of Shiraz, where the university is based, 16 isolated villages were selected, and from each one volunteer was chosen — a literate villager who would have no trouble reintegrating into village life once he or she had completed a six-month